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Broadcasting Britishness during the Second World War: Radio and the British World

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Abstract

This essay considers how radio broadcasting appealed to and reinforced Britannic sentiment during the Second World War. Radio utilised this sentimental appeal to help mobilise a united imperial war effort. Radio played on the bonds of sentiment in a particularly powerful fashion, because it addressed listeners intimately and with a sense of authenticity. It also allowed rapid, regular, and direct communication with audiences over long distances. Imperial broadcasting structures established during the 1920s and 1930s were repurposed for war, under the leadership of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The cooperation of broadcasters (and state information and propaganda agencies) all around the British world was also crucial. Many different producers, writers, artists, and experts helped broadcast Britishness during this period, appealing to Britannic sentiment in a wide variety of ways. Often they linked Britishness with liberty, democracy, and equality, even if this bore little relation to the realities of empire. The British connection was presented as a living and vital force, bringing people together despite their differences. Broadcasters also made a powerful appeal to ideas about a common history and set of traditions. The essay suggests that such themes offered a powerful means of harnessing Britannic sentiment to the needs of war.

Introduction: Radio and Britannic Sentiment

Over the past two decades, new historical research has helped us reach a clearer understanding of the many different connections that helped create a 'British world'. This transnational entity developed, and then disintegrated, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The British world comprised Britain and its settler colonies (also known as 'dominions') in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. It also incorporated the many communities elsewhere, white and non-white, whose members identified themselves as British. The ties that bound the British world together were political, economic, demographic, and military. Yet it was a sentimental idea of Britannic community that provided perhaps the most fundamental and lasting support for the British connection. A world-spanning British identity drew on ideas about shared culture, history, language, and (for some) a belief in a common racial interest and destiny. This sentimental connection, or felt sense of community, largely transcended differences between regions and political parties. Sometimes, it was also able to overcome divisions of class, religion, and race, although such success was almost always incomplete. However, despite this ability to transcend such differences, Britannic sentiment generally acted to privilege the connections between Britain and the settler dominions. It thus relegated India and Britain's tropical colonies to a secondary role within the imagined structure of empire. Britannic sentiment endured well after the other connecting forces that bound the British world together had effectively dissipated. Its ghost continues to haunt Britain in the era of Brexit.¹

¹ For a brief, recent overview of the historiography of the British World see Simon J. Potter, *British Imperial History* (Palgrave, 2015), pp. 98-104. Key collections of essays on the subject include Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich (eds), *The British world: diaspora, culture, identity* (London, 2003), also available as a special number of the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 2:31 (May 2003); Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis (eds), *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary, 2005); Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis (eds), *Canada and the British World: culture, migration, and identity* (Vancouver, 2005); and Kate Darien-Smith, Patricia Grimshaw, and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *Britishness Abroad: transnational movements and imperial cultures* (Melbourne, 2007).

How can historians get to grips with this vast, intangible realm of sentiment? This short essay uses archival evidence relating to radio broadcasting during the Second World War as a route into the subject, and to suggest some core themes. Historians are often 'deaf' to the role that radio has played in the past. They tend to neglect radio as a source for social and cultural history, in favour of interrogating the more easily accessible print media.² Yet, as a growing body of research is demonstrating, radio can offer new and important insights into a wide range of topics.³

This essay argues that thinking about wartime broadcasting can provide a novel approach to analysing how contemporary understandings of British identity interacted with the pressing realities of a united, successful, and final imperial war effort. It shows how contemporaries sought to draw on ideas about a shared history of resistance to foreign aggression, and to appeal to common ideals of liberty, in order to bind the inhabitants of the British world together in the face of Fascism. Viewed from the perspective of today, attempts to claim a positive connection between empire, resistance, and liberty might seem strange, perverse, and distasteful. However, this was not how contemporaries responded during the Second World War: if their pervasiveness offers any guide, then such appeals must have resonated with audiences to a considerable degree.

Radio played a key role as a medium of information and propaganda during the Second World War. For the British world, conflict involved the movement of troops between widely separated areas of formal and informal imperial influence. The deployment of military resources took place according

² See Rebecca P. Scales, *Radio and the Politics of Sound in Interwar France, 1921-1939* (Cambridge, 2016), pp. 7-8.

³ For recent books making key contributions to the historiography of radio and broadcasting, in addition to Scales' book above see Michele Hilmes, *Network Nations: a transnational history of British and American broadcasting* (New York and London, 2012); Marie Gillespie and Alban Webb (eds) *Diasporas and Diplomacies: cosmopolitan contact zones at the BBC World Service, 1932-2012* (London and New York, 2012); David Hendy, *Noise: a human history of sound and listening* (London, 2013); Andrea Stanton, *This is Jerusalem Calling: state radio in mandate Palestine* (Austin, Texas, 2013); and Alban Webb, *London Calling: Britain, the BBC World Service and the Cold War* (London, 2014).

to a tradition of imperial defence, by which forces from one part of the empire could be deployed anywhere, to fight in the broader strategic interests of the whole. Food, munitions, equipment, money, and labour were also redistributed around the empire to match military requirements. This involved conscription, forced labour, and government control of goods and currency reserves. However, the imperial war effort also rested upon the voluntary cooperation of British subjects at home and in the colonies and dominions.⁴ Information and propaganda were required to help win consent for all this, and to boost morale throughout a protracted conflict and its many reverses.

In support of this effort, ideas about British identity were deployed on the airwaves around the British world. Sentimental connections were certainly exploited for official and instrumental purposes. Yet Britannic sentiment cannot be viewed simply as a tool of propaganda. Those seeking to mobilise Britishness in the cause of war had to work with and accommodate deep-rooted and long-lived ideas and assumptions about the origins and nature of that community. Moreover, the structures which governed propaganda in the British world during the Second World War made it very difficult to project a single or consistent message. Wartime propaganda was organised in a decentralised fashion in the British world. Authority to undertake this work was shared among different governments around the empire. State propaganda agencies working in a variety of loose relationships with a range of semi-state and largely autonomous media organisations, including broadcasters. In the realm of radio, this meant that individual producers, writers, and artists were often able to work with some autonomy as they interpreted the nature of British sentiment and its connection with the war effort. There was not one simple, official propaganda line to toe.

⁴ Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London, 2006). Jeffrey Grey, 'War and the British World in the Twentieth Century' in Buckner and Francis (eds) *Rediscovering the British World*. Keith Jeffery, 'The Second World War' in Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (eds.) *The Oxford History of the British Empire Volume IV: the twentieth century* (Oxford, 1999).

Radio should also be of particular interest to historians of Britannic sentiment, because it possesses certain distinctive characteristics as a medium. These characteristics rendered radio a particularly powerful means of conveying ideas about British identity during a period of global conflict. The Canadian theorist of communication, Marshall McLuhan, described radio as the new 'tribal drum', a medium with the power to reactivate primitive emotions, bringing 'the oral and tribal ear-culture to the literate West'. This claim now seems at best simplistic, if not offensive. Nevertheless, McLuhan was right to point out that radio has a special ability to appeal to sentimental feelings of identity, reviving 'the ancient experience of kinship webs'.⁵ Compared with other media of mass communication, the appeal of radio was unusually intimate, speaking to individuals or families in their own homes, and to service personnel in camps and on the frontline around the world. Although a mass medium (with nine million households in Britain possessing a listener licence by 1939 and with similarly high levels of access in most parts of the British world), radio could seem to speak to listeners on a personal level. It thus appealed particularly effectively to sentimental connections. Contemporaries also prized the authenticity of radio – the ability of broadcasting to present listeners with a live connection, and to provide the sounds of real people and of genuine events as they happened.⁶

Furthermore, thanks to the development of long-distance short-wave transmission and reception technologies during the 1920s and 1930s, radio made possible instantaneous communication over vast distances. During the First World War, news could certainly travel fast, but was still subject to the vagaries of the disruption of the telegraph system, and was also limited by the carrying capacity of that system.⁷ In the Second World War, by contrast, radio could bring up-to-date news to audiences around the British world. Bulletins flowed direct from the heart of the empire and from

⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the extensions of man* (London, 1987 [1964]), 16-17, 50, 297-307.

⁶ Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life: a phenomenological approach* (Oxford, 1996), 58-74.

⁷ Simon J. Potter, *News and the British World: the emergence of an imperial press system, 1876-1922* (Oxford, 2003), 186-210.

the battlefield, many times each day, day after day, year after year. Short-wave reception quality was variable and often poor, meaning that short-wave broadcasts were mainly a medium for news and commentaries on topical affairs. With these genres of programming, the need for speed was sufficiently pressing to make problems with sound reproduction tolerable. For entertainment and information programmes, there was less of a sense of urgency, and more of a need for high sound quality. This meant that the transportation of scripts and of recorded programmes on discs, by mail, was an attractive alternative to short wave transmission. Different technologies could thus be used in tandem to strengthen and sustain Britannic identities, harnessing radio to the cause of the imperial war effort.

Broadcasting and Empire during Wartime

By the eve of war, radio had become established in the British world as an effective, if imperfect, means of imperial mass communication. During the 1920s and 1930s the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) had developed for itself a significant role as a promoter of Britannic and imperial sentiment at home in Britain, and overseas in the colonies and dominions. Through its programmes it encouraged audiences at home and overseas to think of themselves as members of a world-spanning Britannic community. It sought to project a number of different versions of British culture, far beyond the nation's boundaries. Both at home and overseas, the BBC broadcast the fruits of British high-culture that appealed to cultivated elites around the British world. It also emphasised the regional cultures of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, which still resonated for many overseas British settlers and their descendants. The traditional folk cultures of the British Isles also

seemed an obvious and distinctive alternative to the commercial popular culture propagated by the United States media and its imitators.⁸

In its attempts to reach a global audience, the BBC's key tool was the Empire Service, established in 1932. The Empire Service providing the foundation for the BBC's expanded and rebranded wartime Overseas Services and, eventually, for the BBC World Service which continues today. During the 1930s, the BBC also began to ship programmes recorded on disc, known as 'transcriptions', to other broadcasters around the empire.

Just as significant as the BBC in terms of the role of radio in the British world was the establishment, during the 1920s and 1930s, of broadcasting authorities and companies in each of the dominions, and also in India and some of Britain's tropical colonies. To some extent, the establishment of broadcasting in the dominions and colonies involved the adoption of the British model of not-for-profit, 'public service' broadcasting. Under this system, radio stations were run by a public authority, answerable to Parliament but not run by the government, and not seeking to make a profit. In Britain, the BBC was ultimately responsible to Parliament but (in theory at least) was not liable to intervention by the government of the day in its affairs. In reality the British model was adopted only in modified and incomplete form in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, and hardly applied at all in India or the tropical colonies in this period.

⁸ For more on the issues summarised in the following paragraphs see Simon J. Potter, *Broadcasting Empire: the BBC and the British world, 1922-1970* (Oxford, 2012). On the BBC and the Second World War, particularly in terms of domestic British broadcasting, see Thomas Hajkowski, 'The BBC, the Empire, and the Second World War, 1939-1945', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 22, no. 2 (June 2002) and Siân Nicholas, "'Brushing Up Your Empire": dominion and colonial propaganda on the BBC's Home Services, 1939-45' in Bridge and Fedorowich (eds.), *The British World*.

While broadcasting systems were expanded rapidly and effectively in each of the dominions during the 1930s, in India and the tropical colonies radio remained underdeveloped. By the outbreak of the Second World War there existed public radio authorities in each of the dominions, undertaking a significant amount of broadcasting themselves, and with well-established and often close working relationships with the BBC. Collaboration among these public broadcasters – the BBC, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), and New Zealand's National Broadcasting Service (NBS) and National Commercial Broadcasting Service (NCBS) – was crucial to the functioning of radio as a tool of imperial mass communication during the Second World War. In the dominions there was widespread ownership of radio receivers, and large audiences for broadcasting existed. Privately-owned commercial broadcasters often existed in tandem with public broadcasters in the dominions, making a financial profit from these audiences.

The work of All India Radio (AIR), directly controlled by the government of India, and of similar authorities in the tropical colonies, was also important. However, in India and the tropical colonies the infrastructure of broadcasting transmitters was often limited due to a lack of available funding for investment. This in turn reflected the fact that the overwhelming poverty of colonial populations, and the high cost of radio receivers (and the difficulty and expense of powering and maintaining them), meant that potential audiences were often small. In India, audiences grew only slowly: a mere 80,000 listener licences were issued in 1939. Of those Indians who owned receiving sets, it was suspected that few tuned in to either AIR or the BBC, preferring German or Japanese short-wave broadcasts instead.

Partly due to a belief in the importance of reinforcing Britannic identities, but also due to the practicalities mentioned above, the BBC Empire Service continued throughout the 1930s to focus on

serving 'British whites under the flag'. The key audiences were British ex-patriates, and those in the dominions who claimed British ancestry. With the creation of the new Overseas Services during the Second World War, this focus on 'British whites' remained. It was supplemented by a desire to reach listeners in the USA, due to the need to rally support there for Britain's wartime effort. Many new BBC services to occupied Europe, in foreign languages, were also established during the war. The BBC's new Eastern Service (primarily aimed at India) also played a significant role, but services in Asian and especially African languages nevertheless remained relatively modest. Broadcasting in English, to the dominions and the USA, and to Europe in a range of languages, were the BBC's overwhelming priorities. In English-language broadcasts, appeals to Britannic sentiment continued to play an important role.

During the Second World War, state control of broadcasting in Britain and many parts of the British world became more direct. Constitutional checks on government influence over the BBC and public broadcasting authorities in the dominions were weakened. New and close relationships were established between broadcasters and state propaganda organisations, such as Britain's Ministry of Information (MoI). In some cases, governments directly subsidised public broadcasters in order to further key policy goals. Notably, in Britain the principle of Foreign Office funding for the BBC's Overseas Services was established. Direct state financing allowed substantial investment in British broadcasting infrastructure and the expansion of programming aimed at overseas audiences. This increased the amount of broadcast material flowing across the internal boundaries of the empire. The BBC's Empire Service developed into a more ambitious set of Overseas Services, with an expanding number of broadcasts in languages other than English. The Overseas Services were divided up into separate transmissions, each targeting the special requirements of audiences in different parts of the empire. To make programmes for these services, the BBC drew on teams of Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, South African, and Indian producers, commentators, and artists,

gathered together by the BBC in Britain and at the seat of war to create an aural representation of the idea of a combined imperial military effort.⁹ Britannic sentiment played a prominent role. When, for example, the Canadian journalist Matthew Halton described for CBC listeners the aerial bombardment of London in 1940, in a talk that would have been transmitted to Canada via the BBC's North American Service, he spoke of 'the flowering of the British spirit to face the darkest but grandest hour of our race'.¹⁰ Five years later, a Canadian airman interviewed for a BBC victory programme, compered by an Australian journalist, explained how 'We Canadians have had to work with men from all the British world. We must go on like this – understanding and working together... or else we may have to do this job again.'¹¹

Many of the programmes broadcast by the BBC on short-wave were picked up by stations around the British world and 're-broadcast' on medium-wave frequencies that could reach a greater number of listeners. Exchanges of pre-recorded programmes on disc, established during the 1930s, also increased massively during the war. This was facilitated by the creation of the London Transcriptions Service, run by the BBC but subsidised and partly directed by the British government. Meanwhile, public broadcasters in the dominions also produced their own information and propaganda programmes, for domestic and overseas audiences. They provided programmes for other broadcasters, notably the BBC, and began to establish their own short-wave services (or to assist state-run short-wave services), allowing them directly to reach listeners overseas.

⁹ For more on this see Simon J. Potter, 'The Colonisation of the BBC: diasporic Britons at the BBC External Services, c. 1932-1956' in Gillespie and Webb (eds) *Diasporas and Diplomacy*.

¹⁰ Matthew Halton, CBC talk 'Britain the Citadel', 14 July 1940, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (henceforth LAC), Matthew Halton fonds, 17.

¹¹ 'Victory Programme', 8 Aug. 1945, National Library of Australia, Canberra (henceforth NLA), Chester and Edith Wilmot papers, MS8436, 3/21.

In presenting listeners with programmes about the British empire, public broadcasters did not just rely upon the expertise of their own programme planners and producers. They also employed or sought assistance from external writers, academic advisers, speakers, artists, and critics. Many of these contributors were deeply committed to the idea of Britannic unity. Even some who were not so convinced still allowed their sense of patriotic duty, or their commitment to fighting Fascism, to overcome their scruples about British imperialism. George Orwell, for example, was drawn into mediating war and empire despite his significant doubts about the morality of British overseas rule. Orwell worked as a writer, producer, and broadcaster for the BBC Eastern Service. The controllers of the Eastern Service were committed to strengthening British rule in India. Although Orwell, in contrast, was not entirely convinced of the merits of the *raj*, he did believe that, for the duration of the war at least, it was right to urge Indians to retain their loyalty to the empire. The alternative was Japanese or Russian domination of the sub-continent. Privately, Orwell at times expressed distaste for the misleading propaganda line driving BBC news reports, but he reconciled himself to his work by arguing that it kept the propaganda effort 'slightly less disgusting than it might otherwise have been'. In *Animal Farm* propaganda work is associated with the unsavoury character of Squealer the pig.¹²

Individuals also worked to broadcast empire in other ways. The raw material for programmes travelled around the British world in unprocessed form, with flows of written information, publications, and scripts crossing the empire's internal borders to provide the basic content for broadcasts. A good example of how such material could be used for radio were the talks prepared in New Zealand by Joan Woods, an Englishwoman married to the professor of history at Victoria College, Wellington. In her broadcast sessions, Woods made frequent reference to 'home front' conditions and initiatives in Britain, Canada, and Australia, and sometimes also the USA. She

¹² C. Fleay and M.L. Sanders, 'Looking into the Abyss: George Orwell at the BBC', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 24, no. 3 (July 1989), 503-518.

illustrated her talks with references to published accounts of new policies and austerity measures overseas, providing comparisons with New Zealand conditions and initiatives and suggestions for borrowing ideas from abroad.¹³

Speakers and entertainers could also travel around the empire in person to broadcast from local stations: two prominent examples illustrate some wider themes. The music hall entertainer, recording artist and film actress Gracie Fields toured Canada, the USA, North Africa, Italy, Australia, the Far East, and the Pacific during the Second World War, for the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA). She broadcast on local stations, as well as entertaining troops and raising substantial funds for the British war effort.¹⁴ Similarly, the playwright, composer, actor, and performer Noël Coward visited the USA, the Middle East, South Africa, Burma, India, Australia, and New Zealand during the war, broadcasting and performing in order to boost morale, raise funds for the war effort, and 'keep alive the feeling for England'.¹⁵ In his broadcasts in Australia and New Zealand (which were subsequently published in Britain), Coward, a fierce patriot, mixed observations on the general war situation with vignettes of life in wartime Britain, and stirring exhortations to further co-operation among the 'English-speaking peoples of the world'. He repeatedly stressed the enduring vitality of the Britannic connection.¹⁶

Writing home from New Zealand, the British High Commissioner claimed that during Coward's concerts 'One felt for an hour or two that one was in the atmosphere of London.' Coward has been 'warmly received throughout the Dominion', and his broadcasts had appealed particularly effectively

¹³ Joan Wood, scripts of radio talks, Hocken Library, Dunedin, New Zealand, MS-1122.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Richards, 'Fields, Dame Gracie (1898–1979)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004; online edn, Jan 2011) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31106>, accessed 3 July 2017.

¹⁵ Noël Coward to Alfred Duff Cooper, 3 Dec. 1940, UK National Archives (henceforth UKNA), London, INF 1/543. See also Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It* (Edinburgh, 2nd edition, 1994 [1986]), p. 188.

¹⁶ Noël Coward, *Australia Visited 1940* (London, 1941), quote at p. 58.

to sentimental bonds: 'One especially, describing the spirit of England and ending with a quotation of the famous words of Queen Elizabeth when reviewing her troops at Tilbury, won universal approval and commendation.' Coward's mission 'was of value in helping people to realize the war and to appreciate the sufferings and the spirit of the people at home'.¹⁷ Coward wrote in the preface to the published version of his broadcasts that he was struck during his tour by 'the abiding loyalty among Australians to England... I was not prepared for their *sense* of England, their steadfast interest in our way of living, for their sympathy and their great pride in us.' He claimed that this attachment

is not facile sentiment, caused by the emotional impact of these war years. It comes from the roots, and these roots lie deep in our same past. England is more than just England to Australians: it is, in a very real sense, Home, although many of them have never seen it and possibly never will.¹⁸

As the analysis that follows will demonstrate, this sense of the importance of a shared history as part of the sentimental Britannic connection pervaded wartime broadcasting more generally, throughout the British world.

Imperial Unity, Democracy and Equality

This essay now turns to consider in more detail some of the key themes and approaches deployed by those broadcasting Britishness during the Second World War. Propagandists sought to encourage individuals and communities, in Britain and around the empire, to make the sacrifices necessary to win the war. Propagandists paid great attention to the theme of a common, voluntary commitment to a struggle for shared values of democracy and equality.¹⁹ The empire was presented as a force for increasing economic welfare and political self-government for all those under its rule. Unity was

¹⁷ Sir Harry Batterbee to Viscount Cranborne, 4 Dec. 1941, UKNA, INF 1/543.

¹⁸ Coward, *Australia Visited*, pp. vii-viii.

¹⁹ For the broader context see Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National identity and citizenship in wartime Britain, 1939-1945* (Oxford, 2003).

emphasised, even in the face of evidence of discrimination, protest, and disintegration.²⁰ This involved presenting listeners with what was undeniably a particular, partial, and politically-charged account of the empire's past, as well as of its present and future. Yet the pervasiveness of these themes suggests that they were deemed to have considerable appeal to Britannic sentiment.

At the outset of the war, the British Mol was keen to emphasise the theme of growing self-determination within the empire. The aim was to defend Britain's colonial record against any comparison with the expansionist policies of Nazi Germany. The Mol sought to stress that the British empire was an 'association of free and equal partners', united in a common war effort against a Nazi 'slave Empire'. It was hoped that good publicity could even turn the preservation of the empire into a positive war aim, if it was presented as an alliance of free nations working in cooperation with each other, a model for a future world order. To achieve this goal, officials at the Mol argued that existing British public attitudes would have to be modified. Older ideas about the relationship between Britain and its tropical colonies would have to be dispelled. Propagandists would need actively to combat anti-imperial prejudices that had arisen 'owing to ignorance of the evolution which has transformed British Imperialism'.²¹

Outside Britain, similar themes were also developed by broadcasters in the dominions. One example was William Macmahon Ball, a Melbourne politics lecturer and the wartime controller of Australia's short-wave broadcasting services. Ball was a regular Australian contributor to BBC programmes, and was invited at one stage to run the BBC's Pacific Service.²² In his *Dominion Commentary* talks for the

²⁰ Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939-1965* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 6-7, 19-54.

²¹ Ministry of Information memorandum, 'Policy Committee – Empire Publicity Campaign – Paper for discussion on Tuesday, 1st October, 1940', BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham Park, Reading (henceforth WAC), R34/953.

²² On the Australian short-wave service see Edward Louis Vickery, 'Telling Australia's Story to the World: the Department of Information, 1939-1950' (Unpublished Australian National University D.Phil. Thesis, 2003), ch. 5; John Hilvert, *Blue Pencil Warriors: censorship and propaganda in World War II* (St Lucia, Queensland,

BBC's National Service, Ball explained to British audiences that the nature of the imperial connection between Britain and Australia had changed during the interwar years. Aggressive, belligerent jingoism had abated. Meanwhile, an enduring sentimental connection remained. Ball argued for example that, in the wake of the fall of France,

[Although] Australians today do not generally get worked up about the Empire as an Empire in the way they used to twenty years ago... it has been very striking how in these last weeks Australians have shown the depth of their devotion to England and all England means.²³

He stressed that superficial disagreements between governments in Britain and Australia should not be allowed to distract attention from Australian loyalty. Such squabbles were 'just the sort of mutual criticism to be expected inside any family whose members have any individuality'.²⁴ Ball took care to emphasise that, although the bonds of empire did not act in quite the same way as in earlier decades, they still linked Britain and Australia together into a single community.

The Welsh-born Canadian barrister Leonard Brockington provides another good example of how a broadcaster used radio to appeal to Britannic sentiment during the Second World War. Brockington was a renowned public speaker, former CBC chairman, and special advisor to the Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King. He made similar points to Ball as he toured the wartime British world and broadcast a series of talks along his way. Appointed advisor to the British Mol in 1942, the following year Brockington visited Australia and New Zealand on behalf of the Ministry. He was accompanied

1984); and, more generally, Errol Hodge, *Radio Wars: truth, propaganda and the struggle for Radio Australia* (Cambridge, 1995). For Ball's relationship with the BBC see R. A. Rendall to Ball, 27 Oct. 1941 and copy of Ball to C. Connor [sic], 15 Oct. 1941, both in NLA, William Macmahon Ball papers, box 1, folder 6. See also the file 'Dominion Commentary' Programme for BBC, 1939-40, National Archives of Australia, New South Wales branch (henceforth NAA NSW), SP1558/2, box 81.

²³ Script for 'Dominion Commentary', 15 July 1940, NLA, Ball papers, box 1, folder 6.

²⁴ Script for 'Dominion Commentary', 4 Nov. 1940, NLA, Ball papers, box 1, folder 6.

by Bob Bowman, formerly of the CBC's Overseas Unit.²⁵ In his talks, Brockington reported on the work of Australians stationed in Britain, Canada, the US, and the Pacific Islands. He also described wartime Britain, which he argued was becoming a more democratic and equal society.²⁶ Britain and the empire, he insisted, were no longer dominated by Blimpish 'icicles with monocles'. Similarly, he argued that the British Commonwealth was made up of 'millions of decent God-fearing, home-loving, generous and just people, who have no desire to dominate anyone, or to deny any man, whatever his colour or race, justice and an equality of opportunity'.²⁷

Brockington's broadcasts clearly harmonised with broader BBC (and Mol) wartime policies of portraying Britain as a progressive rather than a hierarchical society, and the empire as a means of improving the welfare of all its subjects.²⁸ Brockington helped project ideas about a 'people's war' and a 'people's empire' to the dominions. In a talk heard by radio listeners in Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, Brockington stressed that all members of a multi-racial British world were fighting together for liberty and against racialism. He spoke of his own mixed English and Welsh heritage, as an example of the coming together of different peoples under the aegis of Britishness. He developed this into the claim that historic cooperation between diverse groups in Britain was mirrored in other parts of the Commonwealth.

I have stood among Canadians of Norman blood and speech patiently guarding the southern shores of England; I have heard General Smuts salute an Empire that once tried to destroy him, an Empire, which for the sake of humanity, [he] helped so violently to save, so wisely to guide. I have sat in the houses of the Maori listening to the reading of letters from Maori

²⁵ 'Visit to Australia – L. W. Brockington', National Archives of Australia, ACT branch (henceforth NAA ACT), SP112/1, control symbol 353/2/63. See also NAA ACT, SP112/1, control symbol M98, 'Brockington, L.W., visit of'.

²⁶ Leonard Brockington, 'National Talk', 20 Feb. [1943] and 'Talk by L.W. Brockington', 5 Mar. [1943], both in NAA NSW, SP300/1, box 11.

²⁷ 'National Talk by Mr. L. W. Brockington, K.C.', 26 Mar. 1943, NAA NSW, SP300/1, box 11.

²⁸ Nicholas, "Brushing Up Your Empire", 215. Hajkowski, 'The BBC and the Second World War', 136.

soldiers, telling their mothers wistfully of the English countryside, and of their pride in equal British brotherhood²⁹

Brockington was 'broadcasting to us all about us all'.³⁰

Another broadcaster who provided the BBC with despatches aimed at explaining the Australian war effort to British audiences, and at reassuring them of Australian loyalty, was the journalist Chester Wilmot.³¹ When visiting Britain before the war, Wilmot had broadcast for the BBC's Empire Service.³² In 1940, appointed war correspondent with the ABC Field Unit, Wilmot joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in the Middle East. The ABC Unit benefited from close co-operation with the BBC. The BBC provided the Unit with facilities for relaying broadcasts to Australia via short-wave, and did small but crucial favours like providing the Unit with scarce recording discs. Such practical co-operation helped make real the sense of a joint wartime Commonwealth broadcasting effort.³³ The ABC Unit worked with the BBC, the Egyptian State Broadcast Service (ESBS), and the New Zealand Broadcasting Unit to pool resources and thus ensure effective coverage. Wilmot occasionally did work for the BBC and ESBS, in appreciation of the help they had given the ABC Unit. Some of the news reports and commentaries that he produced for these broadcasters reached Australia via the BBC's Pacific Service edition of the news actuality programme *Radio Newsreel*. They

²⁹ Leonard Brockington, 'Calling Australia', 20 June 1943, NAA NSW, SP300/1, box 11.

³⁰ Sir Ronald Cross to E. T. Fisk, 18 Feb. 1943, State Library of New South Wales, Mitchell Library (Henceforth SLNSW ML), Sydney, E. T. Fisk papers, ML MSS 6275/11, file – 'Brockington, Mr. L W'. See also 'Talk by Mr. L.W. Brockington K.C., to be radio-telephoned to BBC', 23 March 1943 and 'Talk for the BBC by Mr. L. W. Brockington K.C., 27 April [1943], both in NAA NSW, SP300/1, box 11. See also *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 April and 11 May 1943. Brockington's Canadian broadcasts were also heard by, and would have been partly aimed at, audiences in the USA.

³¹ For more on Wilmot see, most recently, Neil McDonald with Peter Brune, *Valiant for Truth: the life of Chester Wilmot, war correspondent* (Sydney, 2016)

³² NLA, Chester and Edith Wilmot Papers, series 1, folder 14.

³³ Chester Wilmot to Ball, 28 Feb. 1941, NLA, Ball papers, box 4, folder 29. Wilmot to T. W. Bearup, 4 July 1941, NLA, Wilmot papers, series 1, folder 48.

were then rebroadcast by the ABC.³⁴ Radio news and opinion radiated around the empire in significant quantities, and sometimes in complex and unpredictable ways.

Shortly after the ABC Unit followed the AIF to New Guinea, Wilmot fell out disastrously with the Australian high command, and was sent home.³⁵ In Australia he busied himself with his war writing, and also with continuing to broadcast for the BBC. In his Australian news commentaries for the BBC, Wilmot made good use of his knowledge of British requirements and conditions. He took care to explain the Australian war effort in ways that British audiences could understand and empathise with. Discussing coal strikes in Australia in 1942, Wilmot emphasised that while it might seem

strange to you people at home that with the enemy at our gates, there is still trouble with strikers in Australia... I think it's true that people here are not yet roused as much as you were after Dunkirk, but you must remember that the Japanese are still as far from Sydney as Athens is from London.³⁶

Wilmot could be quite critical, for example when discussing the failure of the British and Americans properly to define Allied war aims, or the dangers of ignoring supply problems as Australian troops advanced in New Guinea.³⁷ This probably acted to balance and thus make palatable the propagandistic elements of Wilmot's broadcasts. He was certainly deemed a success by the BBC, which invited him to join its team of war correspondents covering the Normandy campaign. Starting

³⁴ Lawrence Cecil to Bearup, 17 Nov. 1940, 28 Nov. 1940, and 4 May 1941, and Bearup to Wilmot, 11 Dec. 1941, all in NLA, Wilmot papers, series 1, folder 48. For examples of broadcasts used by the BBC and the ABC see NLA, Wilmot papers, series 3, folders 6 to 20.

³⁵ For more on this, and for scripts of Wilmot's broadcasts for the ABC, see Neil McDonald, *Chester Wilmot Reports: broadcasts that shaped World War II* (Sydney, 2004).

³⁶ 'Commentary for BBC – by Chester Wilmot – relayed by radiophone', 11 Apr. 1942, NAA NSW, series SP300/4, control symbol 140.

³⁷ 'B.B.C. News Despatch no. 14 – by Chester Wilmot – Relayed from Melbourne', 16 July 1942, NAA NSW, series SP300/4, control symbol 168. 'National News Commentary – B.B.C. News Despatch – by Chester Wilmot', 8 Oct. 1942, NAA NSW, series SP300/4, control symbol 187.

with the glider landings, Wilmot spent the next 12 months covering the Allied advance. Later, he acted as BBC special correspondent at the Nuremberg trials. Wilmot continued to work for the BBC after the war, covering numerous events in Britain and overseas.

Broadcasting Britain's Imperial Past

In his broadcasts, Wilmot emphasised how the enduring sentimental connections between Britain and Australia was rooted in a common military history. 'Australian soldiers of two generations have fought and died [in the Middle East] side by side with their British, New Zealand, South African and Indian comrades.'³⁸ Like other contemporaries, he did not present interwar and wartime changes in the constitutional and diplomatic relationship between Britain and Australia as marking a revolutionary departure from past patterns. Instead, he explained them as natural outgrowths of a long-term trend towards liberty and self-government, a shared heritage. As long as this tendency was not blocked, then increasing autonomy could only strengthen the underlying sentimental connections upon which the empire's existence depended.

Indeed, imperial history was seen as playing an important role in the broader propaganda war. As one BBC officer put it, 'patriotic pride needs to be stimulated as much by documentaries on "work in progress" themes as by dramatisations of the historic past'.³⁹ Here, the BBC turned to academic imperial historians for help, including Vincent Harlow, Rhodes Professor of Imperial History at King's College, London. During the war Harlow was head of the empire publicity division of the MoI. Harlow advised the BBC that empire-related radio programmes could help remedy 'profound and

³⁸ 'B.B.C. News Despatch No. 12 – By Chester Wilmot', 3 July 1942, NAA NSW, series SP300/4, control symbol 162.

³⁹ R. A. Rendall, 'Broadcasts about the British Empire', 6 Oct. 1942, WAC, R51/91/1. For more on the themes covered in the following paragraphs see Simon J. Potter, 'What did you do in the War, Professor? Imperial history and propaganda, 1939-1945' in Robert J. Blyth and Keith Jeffery (eds), *The British Empire and its Contested Pasts* (Irish Historical Studies XXVI, Dublin and Portland OR, 2009).

widespread' public ignorance about the empire, while also capitalising on a recent, perceived, but unexplained and possibly imaginary, 'greatly increased interest' in imperial themes.⁴⁰ The BBC also sought guidance from the Australian-born, British-based scholar of empire, Professor Keith Hancock, editor of the official *Civil Histories* of the Second World War.⁴¹ In April 1942, following escalating Indian opposition to continued imperial rule, the Cripps mission offered the Indian National Congress postwar independence. Hancock provided the BBC with guidance on how it should present to listeners 'an Indian settlement, which seemingly has been forced out of us against our intention at the very last minute'. His advice played on familiar themes. Hancock suggested that rather than portray the Cripps offer as a 'last minute spasm', it should be explained as the result of 'steady thought-out development' going back to the days of Thomas Macaulay, the author of the historic *Minute on Indian Education* of 1835. Hancock argued that a parallel could be found in the Canadian rebellions of the 1830s and the Durham Report, which according to conventional wisdom had set the foundations for 'responsible self-government' in the settler colonies.⁴² Indeed, Hancock argued that the accelerated pace of proposed constitutional change in India during the war could be portrayed as a tribute to British imperial statesmanship:

the question to ask is not, why has this happened so late? but, why has it happened so quickly? The period 1917 to 1942 or if you like the longer period from Macaulay to Cripps has to be set against the background of India's millennial [*sic*] autocracy.⁴³

British statesmen were, Hancock claimed, continuing their task of guiding Indians towards self-government, in the face of formidable obstacles.

⁴⁰ Vincent Harlow to George Barnes, 19 June 1942, WAC, R51/91/1.

⁴¹ For more on Hancock see Wm. Roger Louis, 'Sir Keith Hancock and the British Empire: the Pax Britannica and the Pax Americana', *English Historical Review*, cxx. 488 (Sept. 2005), 937-962, 939. K. S. Inglis, 'Hancock, Sir (William) Keith (1898-1988)', rev., *ODNB*, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/39810>], accessed 19 March 2007].

⁴² Although for a more accurate discussion of the legacy of the Durham Report see Ged Martin, *The Durham Report and British Policy: a Critical Essay* (Cambridge University Press, London, 1972).

⁴³ Keith Hancock to Christopher Salmon, 9 Apr. 1942, WAC, R51/91/1.

In advising the BBC, Hancock could be critical of British activities in some of its colonies, arguing for example that capitalists in Northern Rhodesia should remit less of the revenue from copper mining out of the country.⁴⁴ However, like other imperial historians involved in propaganda work, Hancock did not believe that such blemishes detracted from an otherwise positive overall picture. Indeed, he thought that active propaganda stressing the beneficial aspects of empire was fully justified:

we have for a very long time clung, and perhaps still cling, to laissez-faire practice in the diffusion of Empire news and views. In fact we propagand [sic] against ourselves by printing the blue books that show up our worst mistakes... and leave the field free to those who propagand against us.⁴⁵

These sorts of arguments chimed with the convictions of the Colonial Office that, if the BBC wished to 'justify the past to the public', then there was 'nothing to stop us telling the truth attractively', emphasising the benefits brought by 'the vigorous commercial expansion of the past' and 'the social services supplied to the Colonies as a result'.⁴⁶

It was not only academics and policy-makers who sought to put the imperial and British past on air. Writers of popular entertainment and children's programmes also engaged with historical themes to strengthen appeals to Britannic sentiment. Using the proceeds from her sales of radio scripts in Australia to the ABC, the writer Nancy Phelan left Sydney for London in September 1938, eager to get to England before the anticipated outbreak of hostilities. An Anglophile, she described herself as a 'lover of London': for her, 'London was poetry, history, romance, mists and bare trees, lamplight on wet pavements, daffodil buds in the square... Nothing was disappointing, nothing discouraged

⁴⁴ Hancock to Salmon, 20 April 1943, WAC, R51/91/2.

⁴⁵ Hancock to Salmon, 5 April 1943, WAC, R51/91/2.

⁴⁶ 'Note of a discussion held at the Colonial Office on 30.10.42 – Copy for Mr Salmon', WAC, R51/91/1.

me, I didn't care that the British lived on starch and Brussels sprouts.' However, elsewhere in her writings she did show more of an awareness of the realities of working-class life in Britain.⁴⁷ After casual work in London and the Midlands, she married and had a child, and moved to Devon to escape the Blitz.⁴⁸ During and after the war, she wrote a number of radio scripts for the ABC and the BBC, generally aimed at children and women. Many of her children's programmes were historical dramas, fictionalising episodes in the lives of figures such as Bonnie Prince Charlie, Lady Jane Grey and Charles II. In these plays, she drew on her knowledge of the dialect, accents, and way of life of the 'amazingly primitive' people of the west of England.⁴⁹ A script for a radio serial, *Sons of Devon*, dramatizing the exploits of Sir Francis Drake at the time of the Spanish Armada, included the following exchange, representative of her writing:

1st Man – 'Ast 'eard noos Giles?

2nd Man – Ah. T'be praaperr bad. Yes my. 'Tes said they Spaniards is coomin'... Us 'ave now 'awp to fight they – us got naw arms nor naught.

3rd Man – Tes trew, but us mun never let they conquer we. Naw! Not likey. They foreigners mun not set foot on my fields ef I dies fightin' they.⁵⁰

Such local colour provided an interesting and presumably comprehensible backdrop for adventure stories aimed at British and Australian audiences. Indeed, the Spanish Armada proved a resonant historical event at a time when Britain once again seemed to face invasion. After the war, In 1947, Phelan wrote a play called *Drake's Drum* for the BBC's Children's Hour. Set at the time of Dunkirk,

⁴⁷ Script of talk entitled 'London Night', n.d., SLNSW ML, Nancy Phelan papers, box 27.

⁴⁸ Unpublished typescript MSS of 'Friendly natives: an English memoir', SLNSW ML, Phelan papers, box 32. Nancy Phelan, *The Swift Foot of Time: an Australian in England, 1938-45* (Melbourne, 1983), pp. 5, 13. Nancy Phelan, *A Kingdom by the Sea* (Sydney, 1969).

⁴⁹ Script of talk with J. Denton, 2BL, n.d., SLNSW ML, Phelan papers, box 27.

⁵⁰ Script for 'Sons of Devon', episode 10, SLNSW ML, Phelan papers, box 26.

the play drew comparisons between the Armada and Hitler's threatened landings. In the play, a young boy goes to bed worried that England is 'beat', but is assured by his father that 'We haven't even started yet.' His grandmother promises that Francis Drake will return to save England: the play then moves into a dramatised account of Drake's defeat of the Spanish. Returning to the present day, the boy's father goes off to help with the evacuation of the troops from Dunkirk. His grandmother concludes that Britain doesn't need Drake after all: 'We've got Churchill, haven't we?... He's our Drake.'⁵¹

Phelan's scripts re-packaged British historical events in a way that would speak to contemporary audiences of British and Australian children. She mediated these histories in such a way as to justify and support Britain's war effort and the British empire. In *The Royal Leopard*, as in many of her radio plays, Phelan sought to bring history alive by juxtaposing past and present, and by writing about a child travelling through time. The first episode of the series opens in a house in Sydney, where a Professor Jones is having breakfast with his young family, after having sat up late into the night to finish writing a lecture on Edward III. His son, John, tells him that he has recently been studying Edward and the Black Prince: 'Our history teacher said they were no better than a lot of murderers. Worse than the Germans.' The Professor tells John that this is an 'interesting inaccuracy' perpetrated by the boy's history teacher, Mr Snodge, a 'weedy, anemic, spotty-faced, long-haired Conscientious Objector'. John responds to his father that 'Everyone knows you're good at history and all that – but the whole thing with you is that you're an Imperialist and you only write history in a way that butters up England and the Empire and never gives the other persons side at all'. To which the Professor replies: 'A true historian never butters up anyone – his own or anyone else's country. He tells the truth.' He argues that one has to judge the Black Prince by the standards of his time: 'Prince Edward's barbarous habits seem to have upset your Mr Snodge with his delicate

⁵¹ Script for 'Drake's Drum', SLNSW ML, Phelan papers, box 26.

sensibilities, although if we put him beside a Nazi Storm Trooper he appears as meek and humble as a nun.' This debate on the philosophy of history is terminated somewhat prematurely when the Professor sends John to his room. However, it is resumed when, in his dreams, John is visited by a succession of historical characters, who relate the life of the Black Prince and predict the horrors of future war.⁵²

Conclusions

By drawing on voices from around the British world, wartime broadcasters created an echo of a combined imperial war effort. The diverse peoples of the empire, British and non-British, were presented as working together towards common goals of liberty and economic improvement. Ideas about the composite nature of the British imperial community, combining a wide range of different groups under the umbrella of a single entity, were used to underpin claims about the effectiveness of imperial cooperation more generally. Attempts to appeal to Britannic sentiment often also involved the deployment of claims about the British and imperial past. The British world was presented as sharing a history, a 'usable past' which could help justify and motivate the imperial war effort.

It is of course difficult to gauge how far the images projected by wartime broadcasts reflected wider responses to the war, or popular attitudes towards the empire. There is not space in a short essay such as this to consider the (admittedly scant) evidence that survives concerning audience responses. In a wider study of British identities during the Second World War, Sonya O. Rose has presented the BBC as one of the key organisations seeking to promote a united national response to the war in Britain. She concludes that while the achievement of a single, core British national identity

⁵² Script for 'Royal Leopard', episode 1, SLNSW ML, Phelan papers, box 26.

proved elusive, a united war effort was nevertheless, to a significant effect, secured.⁵³ Similar ambiguity surrounds the question of how far the BBC succeeded in generating popular knowledge or enthusiasm for the empire in Britain during the war: historians cannot agree on an answer.⁵⁴ However, when it comes to thinking about the nature and depth of Britannic sentiment in the British world, we might be more confident in hazarding a conclusion. Given the range and extent of broadcasting about the shared history and traditions of liberty and cooperation that, it was claimed, sustained the British world, it would be difficult to conclude that such ideas bore no relation to wider popular beliefs in this period. Certainly, contemporaries often drew attention to broader public apathy or hostility towards empire (a constant theme throughout the twentieth century). Yet such resistance to empire more generally did not necessarily translate into a rejection of Britannic sentiment, of the sense of a world-spanning British community. The British world was not the same thing as the empire, and with its emphasis on kinship and shared culture the British world arguably had a deeper purchase on British hearts and minds than did the empire more generally. In this sense, by emphasising the significance of Britannic sentiment, broadcasters surely did help listeners around the British world comprehend and support the war effort as an imperial one.

It is also worth considering how ideas about Britannic sentiment and the British world shaded into a wider sense of transnational identity, involving membership of an English-speaking world that included the USA. As Michael Barkway, BBC Empire News editor, argued:

Broadcasting day in and day out from this land that stands in the spearhead of our battle-line, we think of you daily, hourly, in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, in the Colonies and remote outposts, and in the United States of America; and we are made aware,

⁵³ Rose, *Which People's War?*.

⁵⁴ Here, contrast Hajkowski, 'The BBC, the Empire, and the Second World War' with Nicholas, "'Brushing up your Empire'".

as it is given to few of our countrymen to be aware, of the solidity and the resolution of the world-wide Commonwealth of English-speaking peoples.⁵⁵

For some, broadcasting empire formed part of a broader attempt to use radio to help unify an English-speaking world.

⁵⁵ Cutting of Michael Barkway, 'Accuracy and Speed, but Above All Accuracy', *London Calling*, n.d., in NLA, Wilmot papers, series 3, folder 31.